

A Comparative Study of Metaphor Translation in English Versions of *Compendium of Materia Medica*

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Abstract: This study applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyze structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors in *Compendium of Materia Medica*, comparing the English translations by Luo Xiwen and Paul U. Unschuld. the findings show that both translators convey the source text's basic meanings but adopt different strategies: Luo favors explanatory translation and explication, while Unschuld emphasizes preserving the original conceptual structure and cultural connotations. the study demonstrates the value of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in analyzing metaphor translation and promoting the international dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine culture.

Keywords: *Compendium of Materia Medica*; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; metaphor translation; Traditional Chinese Medicine; Luo Xiwen; Paul U. Unschuld

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's continuous efforts to promote the international dissemination of Chinese culture, the overseas transmission of classical Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) texts has become increasingly significant for enhancing the global influence of Chinese culture. As a monumental medical work compiled by Li Shizhen during the Ming Dynasty, *Compendium of Materia Medica* not only systematically summarizes traditional knowledge of materia medica but also embodies the rich cultural traditions and modes of thinking characteristic of China. the publication of its English translations has provided Western readers with an important avenue for understanding TCM culture.

Drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this paper systematically examines the metaphorical types found in *Compendium of Materia Medica*. Through a multidimensional comparison of two

English translations produced by translators from different cultural and academic backgrounds, it analyzes the similarities and differences in their cognitive approaches and translation strategies for rendering metaphors, with the aim of providing references for the international dissemination of classical TCM literature.

2. Conceptual Metaphor and Its Application

2.1 Definition

In their landmark work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which people conceptualize and understand the world [1]. Based on this view, they developed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which defines metaphor as a process of systematic cognitive mapping from a familiar source domain to a more abstract target domain, enabling people to comprehend abstract concepts through concrete experience (see Figure 1) [2]. This cross-domain mapping mechanism forms the basis of human conceptual understanding [3-4].

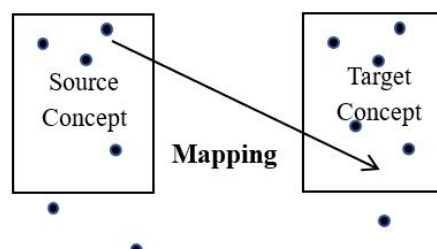


Figure 1. The Process of Conceptual Mapping

Unlike rhetorical metaphor, a conceptual metaphor exists as an underlying cognitive structure rather than a specific linguistic expression. Its essence lies in the systematic mapping between conceptual domains, which gives rise to a series of related metaphorical expressions. Therefore, conceptual metaphor represents a cognitive mechanism abstracted from linguistic phenomena rather than all metaphorical expressions. Moreover, the term

concept refers to human cognitive and experiential structures rather than a logical category in the philosophical sense [5].

2.2 Conceptual Metaphor and the Translation Practice of *Compendium of Materia Medica*

At present, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been widely applied to the translation of literary and political texts, whereas its application to classical Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) literature remains limited. Since TCM theory is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy, many concepts are constructed through conceptual metaphor. Therefore, applying CMT to the English translation of *Compendium of Materia Medica* provides a useful framework for examining how translators reconstruct metaphorical meanings and cultural connotations, thereby facilitating the international dissemination of TCM culture.

3. A Case Study

3.1 Example of Structural Metaphor

[Source Text]: 藥有君臣佐使, 以相宣攝. 合和宜一君、二臣、三佐、五使, 又可一君、三臣、九佐使也.

[Luo Xiwen's Translation]: As far as the functions of drugs are concerned, a political metaphor is employed, viz. "monarch" drugs, "minister" drugs, "assistant" drugs and "guide" drugs, depending on their functions in prescriptions. the following are two major ways to make up prescriptions:

A. 1 monarch drug;

2 minister drugs;

3 assistant drugs;

5 guide drugs.

B. 1 monarch drug;

3 minister drugs;

9 assistant and guide drugs.

[Paul U. Unschuld's Translation]: Pharmaceutical drugs serve as "rulers, " "ministers, " "assistants, " and "messengers/guides" to structure their synergistic effects. A team consists of one ruler, two ministers, three assistants, and five messengers/guides, or alternatively of one ruler, three ministers, and nine assistants and messengers/guides.

[Analysis]: In their treatment of structural metaphor, both translators preserve the core metaphorical framework of "ruler, minister,

assistant, and messenger", thereby maintaining the conceptual mapping from the ancient political system to the prescription compatibility system. However, they adopt different translation strategies. Luo Xiwen employs an explicitation strategy by explicitly stating that "a political metaphor is employed," thereby foregrounding the metaphorical nature of the expression. This explicit presentation lowers the cognitive barrier for readers unfamiliar with traditional Chinese culture and enhances the readability of the translation. By contrast, Paul U. Unschuld retains the political role designations, such as "rulers," "ministers," "assistants," and "messengers," allowing readers to establish the conceptual association through the text itself. This approach more faithfully reproduces both the structural metaphor and its underlying cultural connotations.

In terms of the preservation of structural metaphor, Unschuld's translation adheres more closely to the cognitive model of the source text. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, however, Luo Xiwen's version is more effective in facilitating target readers' understanding of the theoretical principles underlying TCM prescription formulation.

3.2 Example of Orientational Metaphor

[Source Text]: 藥有升降浮沉化, 生長收藏成, 以配四時. 春升夏浮, 秋收冬藏, 土居中化.

[Luo Xiwen's Translation]: Drugs have ascending, descending, floating, sinking and evolution movements, and germination, growth, harvest, storage and maintenance processes to correspond to the four seasons. In spring, drugs tend to ascend; in summer, they tend to float; in autumn, they perform an astringent function as if harvesting; in winter they tend to be restraining as if storing.

[Paul U. Unschuld's Translation]: Pharmaceutical drugs rise, descend, float, sink down and transform; they stimulate generation, growth, collection, storage and completion in conformity with the four seasons. Spring is [the season of] rising. Summer is [the season of] floating. Autumn is [the season of] collecting. Winter is [the season of] storing.

[Analysis]: the terms ascending, floating, descending, sinking, and center in the source text originally denote the five fundamental spatial orientations—up, outward, down, inward, and center. They are employed to describe the

directional tendencies and functional characteristics of medicinal substances, thereby giving rise to an orientational metaphor within the theoretical framework of medicinal properties.

In Luo Xiwen's translation, "sheng jiang fu chen hua" is rendered as "ascending, descending, floating, sinking and evolution movements." By adopting a literal translation strategy, Luo largely preserves the original spatial imagery. However, in translating "qiu shou dong cang", he employs explanatory expressions such as "as if harvesting" and "as if storing," partially transforming the spatial metaphor into a functional explanation. Consequently, the metaphorical mapping from spatial movement to the functional properties of medicinal substances is weakened to a certain extent. Moreover, the translation of "hua" as "evolution" shifts the emphasis toward an abstract conceptual process rather than a spatial orientation, thereby diminishing the coherence of the metaphorical system constructed in the source text.

By contrast, Unschuld renders "sheng jiang fu chen hua" as "rise, descend, float, sink down and transform," likewise adopting a literal translation strategy that retains the original spatial imagery. In translating chun sheng xia fu, qiu shou dong cang, he employs structures such as "Spring is [the season of] rising" and "Autumn is [the season of] collecting," making the correspondence between the four seasons and the properties of medicinal substances more explicit. This approach more effectively preserves the cognitive model through which the source text conceptualizes medicinal functions in terms of spatial experience. In particular, the expression "sink down," compared with the simpler "sink," better conveys the dynamic nature of downward movement and thus reinforces the orientational meaning embodied in the original text.

3.3 Example of Ontological Metaphor

[Source Text]: 甘草國老, 大黃將軍, 明其優劣。皆不同秩也。

[Luo Xiwen's Translation]: Gancao (Radix Glycyrrhizae; liquorice root) is considered a veteran cabinet minister, and Dahuang (Radix et Rhizoma Rhei; rhubarb) a fighting general. Their respective functions dictate their positions in prescriptions.

[Paul U. Unschuld's Translation]: Chinese

liquorice [root] (12-01) [is identified as an] "elder statesman," while rhubarb root (17-01) [is regarded as a] general. This way, their merits and shortcomings are made obvious; they all occupy different ranks.

[Analysis]: In Luo Xiwen's translation, "國老" is rendered as "a veteran cabinet minister," while "將軍" is translated as "a fighting general." Compared with Unschuld's renderings of "elder statesman" and "general," Luo's use of modifying adjectives enables target readers to perceive the distinctive characteristics of the medicinal substances more directly. Specifically, "veteran cabinet minister" conveys the image of a highly respected and experienced political figure, reflecting the prominent role of Gancao in TCM prescriptions. However, the expression "cabinet minister" primarily emphasizes administrative responsibility and does not fully highlight the harmonizing function traditionally attributed to Gancao. By contrast, the adjective "fighting" in "fighting general" reinforces the aggressive medicinal action of Dahuang in eliminating pathogenic factors, thereby making its pharmacological characteristics more explicit. The term "優劣" in the source text does not denote superiority or inferiority in an evaluative sense; rather, it indicates that the two medicinal substances possess different properties and perform distinct therapeutic functions. In Luo Xiwen's translation, this abstract notion is transformed into the more concrete concepts of "functions" and "positions," representing a relatively strong ontological realization of the original metaphor. By contrast, Unschuld adopts a more literal rendering, which preserves the lexical meaning of the source text but establishes a comparatively weaker semantic connection with the preceding personification metaphor, thereby reducing the overall coherence of the metaphorical framework.

4. Conclusion

Guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this study compares Luo Xiwen's and Paul U. Unschuld's English translations of *Compendium of Materia Medica*. The analysis shows that Luo Xiwen adopts a more explanatory approach to facilitate readers' understanding, whereas Unschuld emphasizes preserving the original conceptual and cultural framework. Both translation strategies have their own strengths and contribute to the overseas dissemination of

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